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INFO RUCNCIS/CIS COLLECTIVE PRIORITY  
RUCNOSC/ORGANIZATION FOR SECURITY COOPERATION IN EUROPE PRIORITY  
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L BAKU 000946

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 06/27/2016  
TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PBTS](#) [AM](#) [AJ](#)  
SUBJECT: AZERBAIJAN: FIRES IN THE OCCUPIED TERRITORIES

REF: YEREVAN 851

Classified By: CHARGE D'AFFAIRES JASON P. HYLAND PER 1.4 (B,D)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: For the past several weeks, fires in the Armenian-occupied territories of Aghdam, Khojavand, and Tartar have been a constant news item and subject of commentary by politicians and analysts. The Azerbaijani press and Members of Parliament (MPs) have focused on blaming Armenian forces for intentionally setting the fires, but official GOAJ statements focus on environmental concerns. One Member of Parliament (MP) who traveled to the Line of Contact near the affected area told Poloff that he believed the fires could not have happened naturally. Another MP stated to the press that in her opinion, Armenia is preparing to vacate the districts and is trying to damage the land before doing so. One Azerbaijani political analyst argued that it is more likely that the fires were due to a natural cause. The OSCE will conduct a fact-finding mission in the affected areas July 3-5. END SUMMARY

¶2. (U) The Azerbaijani press claims that a series of fires in the Armenian-occupied territories of Aghdam, Khojavand, and Tartar were set intentionally by Armenian armed forces. Twenty residential areas have reportedly been destroyed, as well as 200 hectares of land used to sow grain and thousands of hectares of pastures. The strong winds typical of the area have made the fires difficult to extinguish. In a statement to the press, the Ecology and Natural Resources Ministry estimated the damage to be 4,084,026 Manats (USD 4.5 million).

¶3. (SBU) Although rhetoric from MPs blamed Armenia for intentionally setting the fires, GOAJ officials made more neutral comments. At a meeting with Council of Europe Deputy Secretary General Maud de Boer-Buquicchio, Azerbaijani

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Foreign Minister Elmar Mammadyarov stressed only his concern regarding the disaster, and stated that Armenia must take responsibility whether or not the blazes were intentional. The Baku Declaration adopted by the recent Islamic Conference of Foreign Ministers touches upon the issue as well. Without assigning blame, it expresses deep concern over the fires and demands that the occupying forces "take urgent measures to prevent ecological disaster."

¶4. (C) In a meeting with Poloff, MP Iqbal Agazade described what he saw during his visit to the front line of the conflict. He confirmed the extent of the damage reported in the press, and insisted there is no possibility the source of the fires is a natural cause. Another MP who visited the area, Qanira Pashayeva, described her observation in a statement to the press, noting that Armenia knows it is time to vacate the districts, and by setting the fires it aims to damage arable land and to prevent the land from being sowed. This kind of speculation is the most frequent explanation given for the fires in the local press.

15. (C) In a separate meeting with Poloff, political analyst Rasim Musabayov shared his view that it is possible the fires began from natural causes. In his opinion, it does not make sense that Armenians would intentionally destroy land that they occupy. But, he argued, that does not diminish Armenia's responsibility to contain the spread of the fire and to care for inhabitants who were forced from their homes. Musabayov points out that although less likely, it is possible that Armenian forces intentionally set the blaze. If this is the case, he feels it was most likely to provoke Azerbaijan into military conflict. He also mentioned that Armenia could be trying to destroy evidence of the growth and transit of illegal narcotics, or perhaps has realized the land will be returned to Azerbaijan and is trying to cause as much damage as possible.

16. (C) A member of the OSCE monitoring team to Nagorno Karabakh and the occupied territories, Peter Keay, told Poloff that the team will conduct a fact-finding mission July 3-5 in the areas around Aghdam and Martuni/Khojavand, where the Azerbaijani side claims the fires were started. The team has also planned a routine monitoring trip on June 28 to Yusifjanli in the Aghdam region, which Keay feels will provide a good opportunity to further appraise the situation. Although he had not visited the region recently, Keay stated that there are usually fires in the area surrounding the front line at this time of year. He concluded that in his personal opinion, there is no reason to believe the fires were started intentionally. Keay will notify Poloff of the team's observations after traveling to the occupied territory.

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